

DUB POETRY – CULTURE OF RESISTANCE

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It was the great Barbadian poet and literary critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite who wrote in his standard work on the development of a “Creole Society” about the emergence of a distinctive Caribbean culture:

Whatever we did that was worthwhile had to be blessed by Europe. And yet the folk tradition persisted. The drums beat from the blood, the people danced and spoke their un-English English until our artists, seeking at last to paint themselves, to speak themselves, to sing themselves, returned [...] to the roots, to the soil, to the sources.¹

It is dub poetry that incorporates not only these elements of folk tradition Brathwaite is talking about, but blends several art forms like music, drama, poetry, literature and performance into one to produce a modern expression of pop culture that has achieved international recognition.

Developing out of reggae music, which had already gained an international status since Bob Marley & The Wailers had crossed the borders from 1975 on, dub poetry was able to reach an audience all around the world. The poetry took over the cultural values of the music, the revolutionary spirit and its militant stance towards society and used the well-established channels reggae had already prepared. Yet even though dub poetry emerged when reggae was in fashion internationally, it still managed to stay out of the vicious circle of artificial fads and promotional interests of the recording industry.

Today, after reggae has returned to the ghettos where it once came from, dub poetry still enjoys international success and an increasing audience in many countries of the world. Poetry scenes bloom in Jamaica, Britain, Trinidad, New York and Toronto. Dub poets performed in countries all around the globe from Iceland to Japan, from Cuba to Brazil, from Yugoslavia to Germany...

Besides the substantial impact it has on Caribbean and black poetry in general, dub poetry has produced a lasting effect on various arts. The extraordinary skill of the poets to present their works and themselves in a very dramatic manner was used, for instance, to make impressive film

¹Edward K. BRATHWAITE, *The Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica*. London, Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1981.

documentaries especially in Britain. Quite recently dub poets have also begun to write theatre plays. Benjamin Zephaniah from London was very succesful with his new form of "dub operas", plays in verse accompanied by music.²

Yet what exactly is dub poetry?

It has been described as "reggae poetry", "reggae lyricism" or "performance poetry with or without music". Ironically, many of the poets themselves do have their difficulties with that label. In an interview one of the best-known poets, the London-based Linton Kwesi Johnson says:

Most of the dub poets are showmen. I'm not a dub poet and I don't want to be classified as one. I leave that to other people.

I've always seen myself as a poet full stop.³

The reason for this reservation can be found in the development of the art form. Since it stems from and has always been connected to reggae music, the poets fear that this symbiotic combination undermines their status as "real poets", making poetry without any further distinction. Although they agree that they make dub poetry most of the time – using reggae rhythms and creole lyrics – many poets feel that the term itself restricts them too much as far as their other works are concerned. Mutabaruka, currently Jamaica's foremost dub poet explains:

The dub poet thing is a limitation to one's need to move because if you do some other things people say you go astray.

That's the same when a reggae musician plays a soul tune, them say 'im a sell-out. My poetry is just poetry.⁴

On the other hand, there are a number of poets who support the concept of a general label dub poetry. Oku Onuora from Kingston, one of the pioneers of the art form, stands out as the one who actually created the term himself. While he objects the name "reggae poetry" as too restrictive he defines dub poetry differently. Instead of sticking to the general meaning of the word "dub" (as intrumental version of a reggae tune) he refers to it as a technical term describing the process of sound engineering at a mixing desk in a recording studio:

Dub poetry is the process of dubbing in or out: dubbing the ignorance out of people's minds and dubbing in new conciousness. On the artistic level it means to dub a musical rhythm into poetry. It's not restricting because I can dub into my poetry a reggae rhythm, a jazz rhythm, a disco rhythm, any

²"Playing the Right Tune" was performed at Tom Allen Centre, London, 1986.– "Job Rocking" was played at Riverside Studios, London, 1987.

³LKJ (interviewed by Neil Spencer) in *New Musical Express*, London, 17th March 1984, p. 19.

⁴MUTABARUKA (interviewed by the author), Kingston, 1986.

kind of rhythm that suits the words. I can dub from now till'a morning.⁵

Whatever the reservations against or predelections for the name dub poetry may be, in fact, the label is generally accepted today and used by everyone be it poet, critic, journalist or student. And even the poets who dislike the label do approve of it in the light of it being a headline for a whole movement.

To define dub poetry is easier, however, than to describe it. Dub poetry must be seen against the background of the art of *musical talk-over* which was invented in Jamaica during the late 1950s. When the first dub plates (i.e. songs that were remixed as instrumental versions) were produced a decade later and each single carried a "version" on the flip side, the deejays who run mobile discos or sound systems became "talkover artists" (or "toasters", "MCs" as they call themselves), using the musical rhythm as background for their own lyrics that were often created spontaneously and performed in a special recitative style. This is regarded as having been the original source for the North American Rap (besides the "Jazzoetry" of the legendary Last Poets in the late 60s).

Many dub poets were once closely related to this dance-hall scene. Some of them have also been deejays in their younger days before they turned to dub poetry. And indeed, dub poetry is also a talkover-style. Yet the poets have taken it further. They concentrate much more on the lyrics while the music is crucial only regarding the rhythm of the poetry. During the process of writing a poem a specific rhythm is built simultaneously by the flowing chain of words. Sometimes, not always, the dub poet adds a musical background to his (or her) poem, either for the recording of a record or the live-performance together with a band. But when the poet performs without music, just reciting a poem, this specific rhythm can still be heard through the words. This is what makes dub poetry so unique: it combines two dissimilar artistic expressions. It is, as the poets would say, "musical and wordical".

Furthermore dub poets describe their art as *Word, Sound & Power*, which means the two levels of WORD (lyrics) and SOUND (rhythm & recitation) must come together to experience the full effect of the poetry. Thus it is sometimes difficult to fully appreciate dub poetry on the page. Some poems appear to be rather weak and even insignificant in their printed form. Yet when read aloud and performed, the poetry unfolds its entire meaning and is recognized as the extraordinary and impressive form of poetry it really is. This is felt even more when compared with a modern "Lyrik" reading which in most cases must appear rather tedious and square. Hence the importance of records for dub poetry. We

⁵Oku ONUORA (interviewed by the author), Kingston, 1986.

have called dub poetry "culture of resistance". Resistance for dub poets living in Jamaica, Britain or Canada includes various aspects and is always working on two levels: on the one hand they oppose the system of modern society in general, on the other hand many poems provide an alternative concept at the same time.

Due to the fact that many poets are Rastafarians the poetry follows the respective philosophical pattern. Resistance is directed against the neo-colonial and still vivid racist attitudes, against nuclear armament and chemical food. Dub poets follow the alternative concepts of Rastafari, Pan-Africanism and undogmatic Socialism. They support any kind of militant (and sometimes violent) resistance to oppression (especially in South Africa) and the idea of a peaceful, multi-racial society with equal rights for everybody and total freedom for any cultural activity. They turn towards the African heritage of the Caribbean people, continuing the old tradition of resistance which began with the first slavery revolts, the preservation of an original black folklore and which culminated in the 20th century with the development of distinctive Jamaican arts: music, dance, fine arts and poetry. Dub poets stand in one line with Louise Bennett, Trevor Rhone, The National Dance Theatre Company and Bob Marley, to name but a few of the outstanding cultural protagonists.

In the ensuing paragraphs of this paper I will comment upon four predominant aspects of what I called 'dub-poetry-resistance':

- I European literary traditions
- II The usage of language
- III Poetry and music
- IV Political and social life

European literary traditions

Dub poets turn down European literary traditions. Especially the models of European/English poetry taught in schools in the Caribbean are totally outside their world. They are simply beyond the reality of an impoverished third world country in a tropical setting (just imagine a little Jamaican pupil in his very British-looking school uniform learning Christmas carols that revolve round snow in wintertime).

Two statements by dub poets shall replace further exhortations by me. Mutabaruka:

I know everything 'bout Hamlet. Imagine, we Jamaican children had to learn 'bout a prince in Denmark. Did you ever

learn a poem by Louise Bennett while you were in school in Germany?!⁶

And Benjamin Zephaniah:

What I think about poetry? It's boring, man, that's what it is. Having a poet there, reading behind a table, a book and a glass of wine. It's a funny thing to say, but I don't like poetry. When I came I moved the table!⁷

Dub poetry's main concern is to constitute an African identity which is expressed not only in the message of the actual words but also by the particular style and the structure of the poetry. The *African griot* is regarded as a shining example, a person who is poet communicator, actor, master of ceremonies, and the cultural consciousness of the whole community tribe all in one. Dub poets emphasize that they belong to the oral tradition that originated in Africa and is still alive today. And, indeed, being a mixed art form itself, fusing poetry with musical rhythms and a little drama, dub poetry takes up the African tradition of art where the pattern of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is as old as the culture itself. In so far the African griot can well and truly be regarded as a direct link to modern dub poets.

This, however, is just one aspect of it since dub poets cannot deny the shaping impact of creole culture. Both African and European elements are mixed together and no matter which part is focused on, the other one can't be suppressed entirely. Seeing dub poetry from this perspective one can understand much easier that – despite their emphasis on the oral tradition – dub poets find it increasingly important to publish their works in written form. Thus they feel that only a book (rather than a record which remains the more adequate medium) really adds to their reputation as poets – even if that may mean too much of a concession to Western traditions.

As to the *topics* of the dub poems one also discovers some references to European literary traditions. Especially the influence of Rasta philosophy with its biblical visions leaves its mark on quite a number of poems. Some do even contain biblical images and other allegories that may be said to be reminiscent of Metaphysical Poetry for instance.⁸

Concerning the poetical *form*, dub poets focus on the importance of a particular rhythm. They regard the classic form of the iambic pentameter (that Louise Bennett still used almost exclusively) as a symbol for the

⁶MUTABARUKA (interviewed by the author), Kingston, 1986.

⁷Benjamin ZEPHANIAH (interviewed by the author), London, 1984.

⁸See especially: MUTABARUKA's "Mortal Me", in Christian HABEKOST (ed.), *The First Poems. Gedichte aus Jamaica*, Neustadt/Rbge.: Buchverlag Michael Schwinn, 1987, pp. 112-115 and p. 153.

European dominance that had for so long prevented the development of a distinctive Caribbean poetry. Thus their creative process of writing (or rather: making) poetry always includes two parts: the WORD plus the search for a specific RHYTHM, the latter one often enough put together in cooperation with musicians.

The Usage of Language

Linguistically dub poets follow the same pattern. They focus on their native creole language not only in their recordings and performances but in the printed medium as well. "Patwa" or "Nation Language", as the creole is also called, has always been the vernacular of the great majority of Caribbean people who had been uprooted from their native West African tongues. In an act of somewhat unintentional resistance, however, it was developed into a new language, unintelligible to their oppressors, a process Carlos Fuentes described like this:

It was a language that the slave was perhaps most succesfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis-)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled.⁹

And yet it was always stamped as baby talk or bastard language by the white and mulattoe upper class. To be able to talk "good" English was and still is be seen as the primary condition for social advancement in a society that was dominated by a British educational system. This system was so rigid that also working class people felt ashamed often enough not to be able to talk the so-called "right and proper way". And still it is English not Jamaican that is Jamaica's official language. So until today, in Jamaica, language means the discrepancy between "Queen's English" as symbol for the upper class, the oppressor's tongue, and "Patwa" as the language of the people, the tongue of resistance.

Thus for dub poets the mere usage of creole means an act of resistance. They continue a development which started with Louise Bennett in the 1940s whose pioneering efforts for a general acceptance of "Patwa" are pointed out by all dub poets: a development which was continued by Sparrow Slinger Francisco's Calypso Poetry, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and the novels of Roger Mais. A development which reached its peak when reggae music transported creole lyrics around the globe and became somehow a mouthpiece of Jamaica.

Yet while especially Claude Mc Kay, for instance, used dialect only to achieve special folklore effects and Louise Bennett concentrated almost

⁹Carlos FUENTES, in Edward K. BRATHWAITE, *Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica*, op. cit., p. 31.

entirely on the folklore aspect of the native tongue, dub poets have taken a more radical approach. Naturally they do use elements of the rediscovered and rich Jamaican folklore like nursery rhymes, story-telling, ring tunes, etc. but, before all, they see language as the most basic expression of a people's culture. They feel that an original language is the most powerful vehicle for promoting an African identity.

Dub poet Levi Tafari from Liverpool expresses this best when he says:

I feel seh language is very important. Because language is 'land-gage' as I see it. It's a measurement of land. What they say is the people that control the mass of the land also control the language. So we have to control our own language, Patwa, to control our land.¹⁰

In addition to this the usage of "Patwa" also supplies the basic rhythmic foundation for dub poetry. It is only the natural rhythm of the Jamaican creole language that perfectly fits the melodic sing-talk style of a dub poetry performance. As dub poet Anum A. Iyapo puts it:

The words automatically fall into a particular riddim because that's the thing about the language that we use: it's rhythmic in its roots.¹¹

All this does not mean, however, that dub poets discard English entirely. In order to achieve the widest possible spectrum of expression they also write poems in standard English. This is also to be seen as part of the anxiety mentioned earlier to be reputed as "real" poets but also as a consistent move to incorporate any possible poetical effect.

Poetry and Music

It is symptomatic that dub poetry became remarkably strong when reggae music experienced the first crisis of its existence during the early 1980s. This decay of a music that had been one of the most influential cultural forces during many years and the potential of which seemed almost inexhaustible, was caused mainly by three different reasons:

1. In 1981 *Bob Marley died* of cancer at the age of only 36. With him the music lost its leading figure and spiritual guide, a world-renowned superstar.
2. The election of the conservative JLP- government under Seaga (after the most violent pre-election period Jamaica had ever experienced) meant the definite end of Michael Manley's experiment of "Democratic Socialism". With its almost total surrender to the U.S. the

¹⁰Levi TAFARI (interviewed by the author), Mannheim, 1986.

¹¹Anum A. IYAPO (interviewed by the author), London, 1985.

conservative government created, among many other things, a *cultural depression*.

3. The dancehall phenomenon, now more than ever, became the order of the day. Yet the revolutionary spirit which had almost been omnipresent was replaced musically by copying versions that had been succesful, and lyrically by boasting about sex and the physical appeals of women and men. The *slackness style* ruled the Jamaican music scene.

As a result reggae went back to the ghettos where it had once come from. Yet dub poetry managed to cross the border at that time. It resisted the current trend of the music by setting itself apart from then popular fads, upholding the revolutionary and militant spirit and pushing it even farer. To get away from the endless copying of certain musical versions, dub poets founded their own bands with musicians who played exclusively for them and created innovative and sophisticated pieces of music.

Political and Social Life

As far as the lyrics are concerned dub poets despise the "slackness style". By comparing the contents of some slackness dee-jay lyrics with one of the rather rare love poems of dub poetry one might even take into account the classic distinction of "eros" and "agape".

Ranking Joe, a very succesful dee-jay in the early 80s in his song "Sex Maniac":

nice it nice mi haffe gi' har all night
 she want more sex
 dat's why she vex
 mi haffe fuck har ovah school 'pon de desk
 nice it nice mi haffe gi' har all night.¹²

And Shaka Bantuta, a member of the dub poetry group "Poets in Unity" from Kingston praises his girl with a classic allegory and not without a biblical threat:

Continous
 As di flowing a di Nile
 A wi love yu
 [...]
 Appreciate

¹²RANKING JOE, "Sex Maniac" from LP *Saturday Night Jamdown Style*, London: Greensleeves, 1980.

Seh fi dont
 Underrate
 Di beauty
 A yu body
 An neva
 Yu goh sell eh
 To anyone
 Fi money
 Cause Jah! wi bun eh
 Girl [...]
 A love yu.¹³

Levi Tafari's poem "Love" sounds almost like a manifestation of dub poets' general understanding of love:

Love is not a sexual act
 Love like sex don't keep one back
 In all situation
 Love is the unification
 Of all nation.¹⁴

Another aspect of this is the position of women which, in the light of Rastafarian philosophy and its old-testamentarian values, has always been a problem for outside supporters of the movement. And here especially female dub poets take a very strong stance, taking the lead of the struggle for liberation of Caribbean women. Lillian Allen, the leading figure of the Canadian dub poetry scene, and Jean 'Binta' Breeze from Kingston are the strongest protagonists.

Jean Breeze has written a whole poem about the effects of the "slackness style". Shouting at the dee-jays she says:

butta
 yu slack
 cah di dawta yu a mock
 we a sistas in dis dispensation
 we a tired a di degradation...¹⁵

Besides the question of cultural decay dub poets aim at three targets with their lyrics:

1. The *political system* in general which Mutabaruka describes in his aggressive poem entitled "De System":

¹³Shaka BANTUTA, "Ti-Ti", in Christian HABEKOST (ed.), *Dub Poetry. 19 Poets from England and Jamaica*, Neustadt/ Rbge.: Buchverlag Michael Schwinn, 1986, pp. 330-335.

¹⁴Levi TAFARI, "Love", in HABEKOST, op. cit., pp.148-150.

¹⁵Jean 'Binta' BREEZE, "Get Back" from LP: *Woman Talk*. US: Heart-beat, 1986.

de system de system
 de system is a fraud
 I say
 de system is a graveyard
 it's either do or die.¹⁶

2. The *social conditions* which have been described best in the late Michael Smith's poem "Mi Cyaan Believe It" where he puts together all the various aspects of ghetto life like a puzzle: the devastating housing conditions, the exploitation of women, the treatment of working class people by their white masters, the violence in the streets and so on, until he comes to the conclusion:

Teck a trip from Kingston
 to Jamaica
 Teck twelve from a dozen
 an see mi Muma in heaven
 MAD OUSE! MAD OUSE!
 Mi seh mi cyaan believe it.¹⁷

3. *Racism* in Britain and South Africa connected to the problems of immigration. Martin Glynn from Nottingham, son of a Jamaican mother and a Welsh father, picks at the problem of white and black complexion. In his poem "Get It Straight" he speaks about white people:

If dem seh we
 is second rate
 an dis country
 is so great
 why dem av fe conquer
 fe we country?
 why dem av fe hide
 fe we histry
 why dem guh pon holiday
 fe tun dem skin Brown
 why dem av fe keep
 our race down?¹⁸

On the other hand dub poets offer *alternative concepts* in writing about:

¹⁶MUTABARUKA, "De System" from LP: *Check It*. JA: Hight Times Records, 1983.

¹⁷Michael SMITH, "Mi Cyaan Believe It", in HABEKOST, op. cit., pp. 137-139.

¹⁸Martin GLYNN, "Get It Straight", in HABEKOST, op. cit., pp. 61-63.

- *the struggle for liberation*
- *Black history*
- a new *Black / African identity* as expressed in Anum A. Iyapo's poem "Afrikan Man":

I am an Afrikanman
and I don't need no one
to tell me how to be
An Afrikan.¹⁹

- *the poetry itself*. Dub poets always see themselves as a "voice" or "echo" of the people. Dub poetry pioneer Oku Onuora from Kingston speaks for all his colleagues when he says:

I am no poet
no poet
I am just a voice
I echo the people's
thought
laughter
cry
sigh
I am no poet
no poet
I am just a voice.²⁰

Thus they do not think of themselves as poets only but also as political activists. Besides their poetry most of them do political or community work. They do not organize themselves in any political party but act on a grassroots level. Linton Kwesi Johnson, for instance, had been a founding member of the political activist group "Race Today" in South London, one of the most influential black organizations in Britain today. Benjamin Zephaniah, currently the leading dub poet in England, founded the first black housing co-operative and opened an alternative book store in London's East end. And in Jamaica, Mutabaruka opened the first health food store of the island, and Oku Onuora works for the Jamaican Human Rights Committee.

All this, the outspoken militancy of their lyrics as well as their active role in the alternative community scene, does not make life for dub poets very easy. Especially in Jamaica where political violence is the order of the

¹⁹Anum A. IYAPO, "Afrikan Man", in HABEKOST, op. cit., pp. 74-76 (spelling sic!).

²⁰Oku ONUORA, "No Poet", in Orlando WONG (Oku ONUORA), *Echo*, Kingston: Sangster's, 1977, p. 43.

day, it needs a high amount of courage to utter words like Malachi Smith, for instance, who, being a famous dub poet, worked as plain clothes policeman, which indeed is a unique case of combination. In his poem "One Way" this dub-poet-policeman says:

Him say
Look man
Have faith
'Cause nutten can stop de rain from fall
Nutten can stop de sun from shine
Stop bawl
Rise up
Revalushan!²¹

And, sadly enough, besides a number of reggae artists who have been killed in the past few years for different reasons, dub poetry already had its first martyr. Michael Smith (born 1954), for many the most promising and powerful young poet, was killed ("stoned to death on Stony Hill") in 1983 by a gang outside the office of the conservative party JLP. Yet even though his death was a shock and a warning for everybody it has also been a spur to keep on.

In an interview Oku Onuora says about the death of Michael Smith:

I 'n' I walk the streets of Kingston as a free man. Should the threat of death silence me? – Then I wouldn't dare reading poetry in public. We don't fire bullets in a gun, we fire word bullets!²²

So we are and will be confronted with dub poetry. If this does not mean that we are forced to wear a bullet-proof waist (we don't fire bullets in a gun) we may be well advised if we prepare and arm ourselves for the inevitable confrontation with the militant spirit of dub poetry which, before long, may demand more than academic discourse.²³

²¹Malachi SMITH, "One Way", in HABEKOST, op. cit., pp. 194-196.

²²Oku ONUORA (interviewed by the author), Kingston, 1986.

²³The author would like to thank PD Dr. Michael Gassenmeier, University of Mannheim, for reading and commenting on the original draft of this lecture.